

**THE *HIJRA* AND THE *HIBAKUSHA*:  
DEVIANT BODIES IN KAMILA SHAMSIE'S  
*BURNT SHADOWS* AND FAIQA MANSAB'S  
*THIS HOUSE OF CLAY AND WATER***

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The idea of “deviant” bodies may be looked upon as examples of a departure from the idea of a universal “normal” body that is a product of the intersection of “superior” strains of race, gender, sexuality, ability, caste or class (Terry and Urla 5). The construction of such bodies as the “Other” is largely a function of identity markers like these, the representations of which in everyday life, literature, and art contribute to the consolidation of the specific categories in which the bodies are located. The Otherness of these bodies is traced through their struggle to combat life while embodying various kinds of deviances, showing how the identity of the Other results in a diverse tapestry of struggles that demand detailed examination. The queer body of Bhanggi (*This House of Clay and Water*) is safest when disguised, either as a religious man, a *qalandar*, or as a transgender woman, a hijra. Raza and his Japanese mother Hiroko (*Burnt Shadows*) encounter suspicion and ostracization due to their status as survivors of the nuclear bomb at Nagasaki - an event embodied in their racial features even more than any scar of injury. As can be seen from the potentially 'deviant' bodies such as the above, it is evident that Othering and the experiences it produces are diverse and challenging.

Adding to the discrimination that the physicality of being a “deviant” body is subjected to is the violence faced by anyone who does not fit the stereotype. This raises several questions: Is there ever

a 'right' way to embody one's sexuality or race? How do acts of clothing, or social behaviour contribute to the creation or recreation of identities? Beginning with the idea that identities are constantly constructed by societal norms, it is possible to trace the ways in which such constructions are performed by bodies denigrated as 'deviant.' Drawing on the ideas of Judith Butler, the consequences of such performance may be studied, focusing on interpreting these as indicators of resistance to Othering through the creation of alternate spaces that offer protection from violence.

The tendency of social forces to create categories of the Other based on identities like race, gender, sexuality, class, religion, and nationality betray an imbalance in power as the dominant groups position themselves as the Self to which the Other is seen as a binary opposite. The Self and the Other, here, are constructed identities, which acquire meaning through a confluence of attributes assigned to each category. The Other is discriminated against and oppressed by the dominant Self so as to legitimise their hegemonic position. The existence of the Other is essential for the Self to maintain their social identity. This idea is suggested in Edward Said, who views the Orient and Occident as binary oppositions; the native Other validating the western Self (7). Taking this theory of the social construction of identities forward, is the work of Judith Butler, who attributes the apparent rigidity of these categories to repeated performances of actions associated with each category, coming to the conclusion that performances of social identities can be negotiated. Butler posits that understandings of concepts like gender, sex, and sexuality are deeply embroiled in what she calls the "heterosexual matrix" a set of social norms that restrict gender identities to the male/female binary, presuming that all normal manifestations of gender are cis-gendered and heterosexual. The heterosexual matrix ensures that bodies that do

not follow the prescribed norms are made to exist in a marginalized condition outside the boundaries of the matrix, but still governed by it (*Gender Trouble* 165). To identify as 'non-binary' is not exactly a subversion of the power exerted by the heterosexual matrix because it allows for such deviations while still holding the deviant bodies in an oppressed state. Registering resistance to such a pervasive system of suppression will be possible only by re-appropriating the tools of the system to “redeploy and destabilize the categories of sex and the originally derogatory categories for homosexual identity” (166). Thus, it is by the reiterations of previously existing norms on gendered behaviour that one comes to occupy a gender identity, and these repeated performances hold the potential to rewire the heterosexual matrix. As Butler elaborates in *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, power operates in such a way as to not only oppress the lower rungs of the hegemonic structure, but also to create the identity of the oppressed. Calling this the “paradox of subjection,” Butler explains that power is sustained by not just active subjection, but by the creation of a condition of dependency that causes the oppressed to both define themselves and their resistance: “subjection consists precisely in this fundamental dependency on a discourse we never chose but that, paradoxically, initiates and sustains our agency” (*The Psychic Life of Power* 2).

When Bhanggi admits that he feels that his body is nothing more than a “communal vessel” (Mansab 5), he unconsciously hits on a truth universal to all bodies that have come to mean only what the hegemonic forces want them to mean. Bhanggi, who self-identifies as a heterosexual male, is forced to live as a transwoman, a *hijra*, in Lahore's red-light district due to his intersex physicality. Bhanggi voices his helplessness when he calls his body, “[the] cage of bones and flesh that holds [him] prisoner... makes a mockery of [him] and

[his] desires, destroys [him] daily”, before emphatically demanding of the reader, “How can anyone be held responsible for the body they're born with, ji? Who can help that?” (5). Bhanggi's childhood was marred by being abandoned at birth, after which he was taken in by a transwoman named Gulabo, who raised him only to force him into sex work at the age of eight. The child's body and his care were thus only future “investment” for Gulabo, whose male customers preferred transwomen sex workers to cisgender sex workers simply because the latter were beyond their means. Both Gulabo and Bhanggi's customers are appreciative of his body only as far as it meets their needs, reducing him to the natural ambiguity of his genitalia. The violence that arises from his “deviant” body is solely his “responsibility”, as he mentions in the lines quoted earlier (5-6).

Society at large has always reduced Bhanggi to the specifics of his genitals, with personalities being concocted and attributed to bodies like his homogeneously and without their permission. Even though “respectable society” found the likes of Bhanggi and Gulabo reprehensible, they were allowed to exist within certain spatial confines in the old parts of the city, where their actions could be monitored and controlled. Once, when Bhanggi was caught crossing the lines drawn for the hijra community by daring to engage in a surreptitious love affair with a woman, public backlash forced him to leave the locality (44). Everywhere he goes, Bhanggi is hailed by the gender and sexual identities that Gulabo assigned to him when she got him his first customer. The abuse does not stop even after he leaves the garb and occupation she gave him, with physical and verbal vitriol frequently flung at him, in the form of beatings and taunts: “Go away before I have you beaten,' [the mullah] says, trembling with ire. 'Look at you, with your woman's face and man's torso... What is down there, you hijray?’” (110). Agents of the power structure, like the

neighbourhood moral police and the pious mullah are constantly around to remind Bhanggi of his physical difference, and consequently, his inferior place in the heterosexual matrix.

Bhanggi's discomfort with the traits automatically attributed to one's body is shared by Raza Ashraf, the son of Hiroko and Sajjad, in Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows*. With a Japanese mother and a South Asian father, Raza inherited a mix of bodily features that elicited many a curious look in his hometown of Karachi. While Hiroko, having left her own country over three decades ago, is at home with the idea of being considered foreign, Raza grows up troubled by his tendency to not fit in, “flinch[ing] every time a Pakistani asked him where he was from,” when their efforts to divine his nativity failed upon encountering his curious facial features (204). He is often teased by street children, “tugging at the skin around their eyes, chanting, 'Chinese, Japanese, money, please’” (182). He tries to minimise his difference from the other boys from their street, avoiding speaking Japanese, his mother's “foreign” tongue in the presence of his peers, asking, “Why allow the world to know that his mind contained words from a country he'd never visited? Weren't his eyes and his bone structure and his bare-legged mother distancing factors enough?” (139). Even as a polyglot, with command of Japanese, Urdu, German, English and Pashto languages, Raza is careful about revealing this talent for acquiring languages to his peers. He got along exceedingly well with his friends, but attributed the camaraderie more to “a studied awareness one he'd had from a very young age of how to downplay his manifest difference,” than a friendship based on a shared identity (139). Having been brought up in Karachi, Raza identifies himself as a Pakistani national, but the “manifest difference” on display in every contour of his body kept him from feeling connected to his friends and compatriots. He is well-liked and

popular among his friends and teachers, but is aware that his popularity is something he had to actively work towards by moulding his history, tailoring his multilingualism, and relegating to the background all those aspects of his self that did not represent the archetypal Pakistani boy. However, this self-fashioning is ineffective in minimizing the physical difference of his biracial body in the landscape of Karachi, rendering Raza literally uncomfortable in his own skin.

It is in an attempt to find for himself a space which will allow him to not have to feel conscious of the foreignness of his body that Raza finds himself increasingly enamoured by the idea of America, a land where, in his honorary uncle Harry Burton's words, "everyone can be American. That's the beauty of the place ... Even you, I swear it" (185-86). Raza views America as his reprieve, a place that will not make him feel like an outsider, until his naive hopes for an American university education is met with practical obstacles. It is at this juncture that Raza discovers another place and name that would make his extraordinary face look right at home: the training camps of mujahideen soldiers fighting the Soviets at the Afghan border, taking on the identity of the Central Asian tribes of Hazara. During a chance meeting, Abdullah, a Pashtun boy from Afghanistan mistakes him for an Afghan:

'Are you Afghan?'

Raza touched his cheekbones reflexively. Until the Soviets invaded Afghanistan he'd never heard that question; but in the last four years, as increasing numbers of refugees made their way to Pakistan, it had become something less than unusual for Raza to be identified as an Afghan from one of the Mongol tribes.

'Yes,' he said, and felt the rightness of the lie press against his

spine, straightening his back. (164)

Correctly guessing that Abdullah had mistaken his bodily features for those of the Hazara tribe, Raza decides to take advantage of the misunderstanding. It was the first time in Pakistan that someone had instinctively known where to place him and his different physicality. When he is assumed to be a Mongol Hazara, Raza no longer feels the need to “downplay his manifest difference” like he did with his schoolmates from Karachi, instead feeling “the rightness of the lie press against his spine,” boosting his confidence. The fact that the only means by which Raza experiences “rightness” in his body is through a lie speaks for the extreme Othering he had encountered till then.

On finding this crevice in the social topography where he can fit his body into, he soon starts living a double life that of Raza Konrad Ashraf, a misfit who increasingly felt out of place in the nation Pakistan was transforming into (Raza's teenage years coincide with the reign of General Zia ul-Haq as President of Pakistan and, as Ian Talbot points out in his book, *Pakistan: A Modern History*, his reign is infamous for the government's “Islamization” policies that changed the socio-cultural fabric of the country irrevocably) and of Raza Hazara, who did not have to be self-conscious about his neither-here-nor-there body and was accepted without question as a Hazara. Raza Hazara had the kind of confidence in himself that was difficult for Raza Ashraf to have, as the former “never had to duck his head forward so his hair would hide his features” (207). When Salma, a neighbourhood girl he felt attracted to confessed that neither she nor any other girl who is aware of his family's history will marry him because he could be “deformed,” Raza Ashraf saw that in addition to the difference he felt in his cheekbones, there was another aspect of

his biological make-up that would always keep him a stranger: his nuclear lineage as the son of a *hibakusha* from when his mother survived the bomb at Nagasaki. Akiko Naono defines *hibakusha* as “someone who has directly received injurious effects from an atomic bombing, rather than all who suffered as a result” (334), especially with reference to Hiroshima and Nagasaki attacks. It was Salma's rejection of Raza, based on his foreignness and 'deformity' that pushed him further into the persona of Raza the Hazara. Yearning to prove to her that there were people who were not repulsed by him as she seemed to be and counted him as one of their own, he decides to travel with Abdullah the Afghan to a mujahideen supply line in Peshawar. Raza had been moonlighting as a Hazara in front of Abdullah and his brothers, making up tales of family loss in the war and learning to handle assault rifles to avenge this fictional tragedy (198). He gets tired of his new identity after a while, describing it as “wearying” at one point, but is unable to completely abandon the comfortable space it provides him (207).

Like Raza, Bhanggi too was able to find sanctuary right at the epicentre of a religious ideology that refused to acknowledge his existence as a person. After being attacked for transgressing the boundaries of a hijra placed around him by the heterosexual matrix, he realises that it is easier to survive if he does not reveal his true identity as a cis-gendered man by living under the disguise of a holy *qalandar*. The identity of a hijra, though it put him on the margins of society, offered him protection in the form of Gulabo and the rest of the hijra community of Heera Mandi. However, Bhanggi was not one of them; he never identified as transgender (Mansab 44). The only way for Bhanggi to escape a life of being raped and exploited as a sex worker is by donning the robes of a religious *qalandar*, performing the role of a holy man. As he confesses to his friend the *kabbadiyya*, “They all

think I am a holy hijra. Laughter bubbles in my chest but it dies long before it can coalesce in my throat. It's because I wear green robes like Khizr and sit in a dargah. Symbols and masks are enough, ji. No one bothers to look any deeper” (76). In Bhanggi's laughter is the quiet mockery of a moral and religious order that had kept him imprisoned within fear and self-doubt for all of his life. The teenage Bhanggi lacked agency as well as the financial and emotional independence to confess his difference from the only family he has known, the *hijra* community, but the adult Bhanggi is able to subvert this situation to his advantage by holding on to the hijra identity for as far as it offers him protection, at the same time disguising himself as a holy man which keeps him away from the red-light streets of Heera Mandi. Bhanggi retains the support of the hijra community, but the green robes and wise words of a *qalandar* function as “symbols and masks” that allow him to exist in a religious space similar to one he was accused of defiling not long before (110).

Thus, it is possible to see the ways in which Raza and Bhanggi subvert the encoded meanings of their Othered bodies to carve out safe spaces to exist in. Bhanggi attains this through a performance of piety, calling upon “symbols and masks” to allow him to lead a life of dignity and self-sufficiency. The teenage Raza is able to feel unlike a misfit only in a borrowed ethnic identity. Kamila Shamsie's and Faiqa Mansab's novels offer commentary on the Othering faced by bodies that do not align with the dominant paradigms of categories like gender and race, and the lengths to which refashioning helps create alternate identities that preserve the dignity of such bodies while also offering them a safe space to inhabit. Such spaces, the novels argue, do not completely subvert existing power structures, but offer hope of progress.

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